

Good Governance of Early Childhood Care and Education: Lessons from the 2007 EFA Global Monitoring Report

Introduction

The EFA Global Monitoring Report of 2007, *Strong Foundations*, urges countries to develop a national early childhood policy to promote the holistic development of young children.¹ A key element of such a policy is *governance* – the allocation of responsibility for decision-making and delivery across government departments, levels of government, and public and private actors. Policy decisions about governance have widespread implications for the types and quality of children's experiences before they begin school. This brief, drawing on *Strong Foundations*, reviews how nations govern Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) systems, the successes and challenges that arise, and policy lessons.

Why is governance important?

Governance is the "glue" that holds the early childhood system together. Without strong governance, parents may struggle to find reliable childcare services. Some parents end up choosing multiple ECCE arrangements of uneven quality to meet their family's needs. Children may experience discontinuity as they are jostled from one setting to another.² Good governance can ensure that services attain quality standards, are affordable, meet local demand, promote cost-effectiveness and achieve equity goals. As the early childhood field expands and becomes increasingly complex, policymakers need to address governance to ensure more coherent ECCE policy across government agencies, levels of government and programs.

How do countries govern ECCE ... at the national level?

Most countries divide responsibility for ECCE among two or more ministries.³ This multi-sectoral approach can bring together different agencies, expertise and resources, but may spark inter-agency conflict.⁴ On the ground, fragmented responsibility may aggravate access and quality disparities.⁵ To meet these challenges, a growing number of countries have consolidated responsibility for all forms of ECCE within one ministry. Designating a lead agency makes it easier to develop and implement policies and reduces some inefficiency. The Nordic countries pioneered this approach to integrating education and care in the 1970s and have ensured

high access and quality (e.g., staff training, ratios) across various forms of ECCE.⁶

Since the late 1980s, more and more countries – including Brazil, Jamaica, Kenya, New Zealand, Norway, South Africa, Sweden, Spain, and Vietnam – have designated *education* as the lead ministry with the main responsibility for ECCE. For example, in Jamaica, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Culture assumed responsibility for Early Childhood and Day Care Units in 1998. Common regulations cover health, safety and nutritional requirements, and guidelines that foster children's social development and learning. Jamaica's integrated approach maximizes limited resources by reducing duplication and fragmentation.⁷

Selecting education as the lead ministry focuses attention on children's learning, including the transition to primary school. Once ECCE becomes part of the school system, it is more likely to be seen as a public good, which can lead to increased resources and greater access. For example, when Sweden transferred responsibility for ECCE from the Ministry of Social Affairs to Education in 1996, the government introduced an entitlement to ECCE for children from age 12 months, free preschool for all 4- and 5-year-olds, and a national curriculum framework.⁸

Integrating the early years into the education system also carries risks, as ECCE often struggles for attention and resources within the education bureaucracy. Some worry that ECCE services will come under pressure to become more "school-like." Moreover, in countries with child survival concerns, other agencies often are more suited to meet children's health, sanitation and nutritional needs.

Regardless of the lead agency, *coordination* across all institutions and sectors involved in ECCE is needed. In sub-Saharan Africa, inter-sectoral coordination commissions have achieved some success in coordinating pilot projects, policy formulation and situational analyses.⁹ In Latin America, similar efforts have promoted greater public awareness of ECCE, better service coverage, and more collaborative policy formulation. Inter-sectoral coordination tends to be more effective when a strong agency leads and when the commission has the power to make funding decisions.¹⁰

¹ UNESCO (2006). *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2007 -- Strong foundations: Early childhood care and education* (Paris, UNESCO).

² Moore, K.A. & Vandiviere, S. (2000). *Turbulence and child well-being* (Washington, DC, Urban Institute).

³ These tend to include education (for pre-primary), and health, social welfare, and/or children/women's affairs. Kamerman, S.B. (2005). *A global history of ECEC*. Background paper for EFA GMR 2007.

⁴ In federal states, the challenges of divided national responsibilities for ECCE may be compounded by divided jurisdictions between the central government and the state or local governments.

⁵ Generally, ECCE services within education systems tend to be more universally accessible and are often free, whereas ECCE programs within other sectors tend to have stricter eligibility requirements and charge fees.

⁶ OECD (2001). *Starting strong: Early childhood education and care* (Paris, OECD).

⁷ <http://www.moec.gov.jm/divisions/ed/earlychildhood/index.htm>

⁸ Lenz Taguchi, H. & Munkammar, I. (2003). *Consolidating governmental ECCE services under the ministry of education and sciences: A Swedish case study*. (Paris, UNESCO).

⁹ Hyde, K.A.L. & Kabiru, M.N. (2006). *Early childhood development as an important strategy to improve learning outcomes* (Paris, ADEA).

¹⁰ UNESCO-OREALC (2004). *Inter-sectoral co-ordination in early childhood policies and programmes: A synthesis of experiences in Latin America*. (Santiago, Chile, UNESCO, OREALC).

... across levels of government and programs?

Decentralization of ECCE to local governments, communities or individual programs is a common strategy for increasing local transparency and adapting services and resources to community needs and circumstances. In some cases, decentralization has fostered more diverse forms of ECCE that better meet families' preferences. However, local politics and funding often lead to uneven implementation of national policies. In India, limited local capacity and resources in some parts of the country have created difficulties in targeting ECCE to disadvantaged children.¹¹ Local administrators often need training, support and oversight to make informed decisions. Decentralization in CEE/CIS¹² countries often concealed less central government spending and responsibility for preschools.¹³ If decentralization is not accompanied by well-targeted funding, disparities develop between wealthier urban and relatively poorer rural areas.

Policymakers struggle to achieve the appropriate balance between local discretion and central monitoring. After a period of decentralization, some countries have reverted to a greater role for central government. In Slovakia, for example, local education authorities were responsible for ECCE from 1990-96, but now it is back in the hands of regional and district authorities.¹⁴ Many OECD countries now use centralized standards, curriculum frameworks and quality requirements to counteract the risk of inequities arising from greater local decision-making.

... across public and private actors?

Non-public actors involved in ECCE include community-based non-governmental organizations, religious groups, and for-profit entities. Private actors can support government efforts to expand, improve and coordinate ECCE provision. The private sector is particularly prominent in sub-Saharan Africa, the Arab States, the Caribbean and East Asia. *Public* provision has been an integral part of ECCE systems in most European countries.

Much can be learned from the CEE/CIS region, where private providers mushroomed as government support decreased with the decentralization of the 1990s, posing financial constraints. The growing diversity of providers has fostered innovative practices (e.g., alternative pedagogies, parent involvement), but also inequalities in access. A concern related to privatization is that entrance requirements and high fees may exclude many vulnerable and disadvantaged children from ECCE in the region.¹⁵

In general, proponents argue that market-based approaches in ECCE encourage competition, increase economic efficiency and promote parental choice. Unless carefully monitored, however, privatization may also lead to cost-cutting at the

expense of quality. When demand-side approaches dominate, service gaps tend to occur in rural and low-income areas which are less profitable for providers. Private providers operating outside the public system often determine eligibility requirements, quality standards and fees. A two-track system may develop, with children from wealthier families attending expensive, higher quality private programs while other children resort to low-cost, low-quality public alternatives.

Policy lessons for good governance

Involve stakeholders from a range of sectors (e.g., health, education, nutrition) to ensure that ECCE policy development and implementation meet the diverse needs of children and families in different country contexts. Inter-sectoral efforts work best when they are led by a strong agency with the power to make funding decisions.

Clearly delineate the responsibilities for ECCE. The involvement of each ministry and sector needs to be clarified, with systems for accountability put into place. A lead ministry for ECCE can promote the coherent policy development and implementation and reduce duplication.

Consider the opportunities and risks of integrating ECCE into the education system. Along with greater access and higher standards, "schoolification" concerns have arisen in countries that have integrated ECCE under education. To improve continuity in children's learning without losing early childhood-specific pedagogy, it is critical for teacher training, curriculum and assessment to focus more on young children (including those under age 3).

Ensure adequate resources to support local decision makers. To reduce geographic and socio-economic disparities that arise with decentralization, local actors need funding and capacity building to develop and implement ECCE programs. Financial incentives may help attract ECCE providers to underserved areas.

Establish regulations and monitoring systems that apply equally to the full range of public and private settings. Limited regulation of the private sector can negatively affect access and quality, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. Instead, policy could require providers receiving public funds to meet or exceed national quality guidelines and follow a national fee scale.

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¹¹ The World Bank (2004). *Reaching out to the child – An integrated approach to child development*. (New Delhi, Oxford University Press).

¹² Central Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States.

¹³ McLean, H. (2006). *Reflections on changes in legislation and national policy frameworks: ECCE in Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Romania and Ukraine*. Background paper for EFA GMR 2007.

¹⁴ UNESCO-IBE (2006). *Cross-national compilation of national ECCE profiles*. Background paper for EFA GMR 2007.

¹⁵ McLean, H. (2006).

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